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Stingy? I beg to differ.

When the UN's disaster relief coordinator Jan Egeland called Western nations like the United States "stingy" in their help for developing nations, he made the usual mistake of failing to account for the humanitarian efforts of the U.S. military.

When international donors pledge international assistance, they commit to pay for supplies to be delivered to the capital city of a country in need. Without the help of the U.S. military, those supplies would pile up at the airport, offering little help to those in need.

The U.S. is the only nation able to move large amounts of food, fuel and medicine to anyplace on Earth. Without the airlift and other logistical expertise of the U.S. military, most relief missions would fail to reach the victims in time. The U.S. is the only nation that can quickly muster the trained air crews and equipment needed to accurately airdrop medicine to remote Asian islands. The cost of flying just one American UH-60 helicopter totals more than \$3,000 an hour, and a C-130 cargo plane costs almost \$4,000 an hour. The average mission lasts 10 hours and we expect that U.S. aircraft will be flying every day for the next several weeks.

In response to last month's Indian Ocean tsunami, the U.S. military provided a fleet of ships along with the 13,000 sailors and Marines of the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier. We added supply ships, helicopters, C-130 cargo planes and search-and-rescue aircraft. The supply ships will provide the first fresh water and electricity to affected areas since the wave devastated coastlines from Indonesia to East Africa.

U.S. helicopters and aircraft dwarf any local air force and ultimately end up serving as the only link from the capitals to villages in need. The cost of our humanitarian logistical effort totals several million U.S. dollars--every hour. Over time, the U.S. military support to the tsunami relief efforts will more than double the \$350 million humanitarian aid commitment of the U.S.

UN officials never include the cost of American airlifts or logistics in UN contributions. But without the logistical support provided by Americans in uniform, international aid officials would be stranded back at headquarters.

In many affected islands, all road, rail and air links have been destroyed. International aid agencies cannot reach those in need without the helicopters and cargo planes of the U.S. military. Looking at relief efforts outward from UN headquarters in New York, one could be impressed by the financial pledges of many nations.

Using a better perspective from the eyes of a mother in the center of a devastated village in Indonesia, the first international relief she will likely see is an American helicopter landing with needed supplies. For many tsunami victims, they will carry a powerful memory of an American in uniform offering the first real help after this near biblical disaster.

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was right when she said the U.S. was the "indispensable nation." America is the lead donor to the entire international community.

But we do much more. America is not only one of the top donors to international humanitarian efforts, it also is the only international partner that can ensure medicine and food reach victims in time. The contribution of the U.S. military to the tsunami relief mission is not just an addition to other international efforts--our helicopters provide the final and most important link to outside help.

We should always remember that Americans not only fund international relief efforts, we ensure supplies actually reach those who need it most.